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AUTHOR Jackson, Lisa R.
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ABSTRACT

The relationships among identity, school engagement, and goal attainment for African American adolescents in urban public high schools were studied with 63 ninth graders. In bi-weekly workshops, information was obtained about student dreams and goals, self-concepts, and knowledge of what they needed to do to attain their goals. To explore engagement strategies, students were asked to respond to scenarios about students with school problems. Some preliminary conclusions have been drawn from this ongoing study. Race and ethnicity were not concepts that students generally situated inside themselves, but were considered issues that created problems or only mattered because other people made them matter. Students distinguished themselves from stereotypes, and clearly recognized that they had to traverse two worlds, a white world and the black society in which they lived. Students perceived race to be a problem of other people that then interfered with chances in their own lives. They believed that they were working hard, but often did not understand the paths they needed to take to reach their goals. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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"Doing" School: Examining the Role of Ethnic Identity and School Engagement in Academic Performance and Goal Attainment

Lisa R. Jackson, Ph.D.

Boston College

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Statement of the Problem

While there are a variety of factors that influence academic achievement, two that are rarely examined together are (1) the role of identity in the development of academic performance and (2) the importance of school engagement and identification for academic achievement (Davidson, 1996; Voelkl, 1996). This research examines the relationships between identity, and school engagement, and goal attainment for African American adolescents attending urban public schools.

Although in some areas (e.g., high school completion) the gap between African American and white students is getting smaller, African American students continue to do less well academically than their white counterparts. Although high school completion rates for African Americans have improved, in 1995 8.6% of white students dropped out of high school while 12.1% of African Americans did so. In terms of academic performance, during the 1994-95 school year African American students on average scored 100 points less than whites on both the verbal and math SAT exams (NCES 1996, 1997).

In an attempt to identify the causes of underachievement in African Americans and to develop interventions to improve their academic performance, researchers have considered a variety of factors (Beale Spencer, M., Dupree, D., & Hartman, T., 1997; Graham, 1988; Jarrett, 1995). It has been shown that for all students, school engagement affects academic performance (Finn, 1993; Finn and Rock, 1997). We also know that for African Americans in particular, ethnic identity can have consequences for school disengagement (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1988). This study is an initial step in

a program of research to identify antecedents of school engagement. Given that little research exists concerning the antecedents for school engagement (Finn, 1993), the findings from this study can serve in the development of future research in this area, and inform intervention efforts to maintain and improve the school engagement of these students and ultimately improve their academic performance.

School Engagement

Finn (1993) identifies school engagement as having a behavioral component and an affective component. Behaviorally, students can be actively engaged in school by attending school regularly, taking initiative in classrooms, and participating in extracurricular activities. Affectively, what is important for engagement is the degree to which a student feels they belong in school, and they value the utility of school and its related outcomes. In his study of "at-risk" students (students who are at-risk via status variables such as race, and socioeconomic status), Finn (1993) found that students who are more behaviorally engaged in school are also more often academically successful, regardless of their "at-risk" status. However, on the dimension of affective engagement, high and low performers equally felt a sense of belonging with school. Finn asserts that to explain this finding, we need to know more about the underlying psychological processes that result in engagement.

Voelkl (1996) takes a closer look at the affective component of school engagement in her work. She argues that identification with school is necessary for school engagement. If students do not to value school or feel a sense of belonging in school, they may not develop adequate strategies for school engagement. In her study of school

identification, Voelkl (1996) found that African American girls tend to have a stronger identification with school than African American males and their male and female white peers.

Ethnic Identity and School Engagement

Ogbu (1991) suggests that African American adolescents perceive school environments as hostile due to their cultural community's societal and historical experiences of racism and oppression in these environments. In response to this perception, many youth create "oppositional" identities that, according to Ogbu, prevent them from persisting in the face of academic challenges. Fordham (1988; 1993) suggests that the only engagement strategy available for academically successful urban African American girls is to function as "phantoms of the opera". Using data from her ethnographic study, she argues that high achieving girls adopt a "raceless" persona, receive rewards from teachers for their silence and conformity, and are alienated by the larger African American community because they are viewed as "selling out" or adopting the values and behaviors associated with whites. Underachievers on the other hand have a visible presence on campus, and are supported by the larger African American community. They do not pay the price of academic success, which Fordham argues is a loss of voice.

Contrary to Fordham (1993), Davidson (1996) asserts that maintaining an identity in "opposition" to mainstream school culture does not necessarily equate with school failure. In her research she examines the intersection between urban adolescents' "oppositional" identities and institutional school practices. Focusing on the role of

schools and factors such as academic tracking, negative expectations, and barriers to information, in her ethnographic study she found that students of color (including African Americans) can practice their cultural identities in ways that support academic achievement, while they also resist accommodating to mainstream culture. As a complementary example, O'Connor (1997), using structured and open-ended interviews, found that a strong collective cultural identity actually served to enhance self-efficacy for some African American students, rather than contributing to academic failure. Recognizing that existing structural barriers (e.g. racism, classism) could impede their educational progress, these students maintained high optimism regarding their goals, and engaged in corresponding supportive behaviors (e.g. maintaining strong grade point averages). In addition, O'Connor points out that the academically successful students had significant others in their lives who offered them models for success despite societal barriers. This study shows that a strong sense of identity that includes a consciousness about existing societal barriers combined with the constructive influence of significant others can contribute to academic engagement and success.

Research Design

The present study asks the following questions: (1) How do urban African American students define themselves and their goals (i.e. what are the important factors that constitute their identity? What goals do they have?); and (2) What is the relationship between their identity, their level of school engagement and their desired goals? To investigate these questions we drew on the strengths of a mixed-methodology. The purpose for this mixed-method design is complementarity: "Results from one method

type are intended to enhance, illustrate, or clarify results from the other" (Caracelli & Greene, 1993, p.196). Today I will present the various qualitative techniques we have used to collect data and provide some examples of data collected thus far. I will conclude by discussing our analysis plan.

A total of sixty-three students attending a predominately Black urban high school in the Boston area, participated in the qualitative portion of the data collection. Of the 63, 52 (82%) were freshman and 11 (18)% were sophomores. Thirty-two (51%) were female and 31 (49%) were male. Working with school staff, we identified four classrooms to work with on a regular basis. From November of 1998 to the present we have conducted bi-weekly workshops with students. Data collection activities conducted during these workshops included focus group interviews, questionnaires, and creative expression activities including drawing and collage.

Data Collection and Preliminary Findings

Who you are now and who do you want to be?

One of the first activities we engaged in with the students was a discussion about their dreams and goals. We wanted to know what they hope to become, whether they thought they would get there, and whether they saw a connection between what they were doing now and those future goals. To provide students with a place to start thinking about their future, we began with a brainstorming session. We asked students how they define goals, what their hopes and dreams were, whether they thought they could attain them, and how much control they felt they had over what their lives looked like in the moment and how they might look in the future.

We closed the activity/discussion by having students complete a worksheet that had three questions as you see on the overhead: (1) What kind of person are you now? (2) What kind of person will you be in five years? (3) What will you be doing in five years? For the first question, a high number of students referred to themselves as being hard workers. Other categories with high numbers of responses include personality, speak their mind, and smart/intelligent. Examples of statements are as follows:

Personality

- "Dedicated, head strong, some stubborn, unimaginative, persistent, hard-working."
- "I am a person that loves to make people laugh. I think I am very generous."

Smart/Intelligence

- "I am a person with great common sense. As a person I think mentally before physically."
- "I'm an intelligent person."

Hard Worker

- A hard working African American male.
- I'm the type of person, who says what is on my mind, but will not make a mistake and mess everything up.

In terms of what kind of person they will be in five years, again, the personality category had many responses. The working hard category also continued to have responses, as did the smart/intelligence. Many students also said they would be in college

or be the same person. For the final question, most students said they would be in college or have a career. Only 3 students mentioned work specifically. Sports also was a category with many responses. Here are some more examples:

Career

- "I will be a business man or a computer animator."

College

- "I will be in college, I hope, maybe starting my life."

Sports

"I hope to go to a division one college and play ball and learn more about computers."

Goal Maps

Now that we had an understanding of students' goals, we then wanted to find out whether students' knew what they needed to do to attain these goals. We wanted to know if students could articulate the strategies that they would use to reach their goals? For this activity we decided to try creative expression. Students were asked to draw what we called a goal map. The directions for drawing the map were as follows:

1. Identify where you are now.

2.Identify the end point of the goal you chose.

3. Next, identify the things you need to do to get to the end (your goal). Map these out as points between where you are now and your goal.

4. For each point on your map, give 3-5 examples of how you will reach that point.

Team members presented examples of goal maps to help students get the idea. We also reminded them of the goal worksheets they had completed earlier as a way to prime their thinking. I have brought a couple of examples of the products from this activity that I'll pass around. As you can see the hardest part of this task for students was identifying examples of how they would reach a given point on their map. It was quite easy for students to identify the larger points. But the strategies necessary for arriving at a point were less clear in many cases. Our team members made similar observations regarding the maps in their fieldnotes:

- "The strongest theme of the day was that these kids all have very high goals for themselves, but I'm not sure how many of them are aware of what they need to reach these goals. No one spent a lot of time talking about strategies they use to negotiate the school, or what they need to do to finish besides saying 'Get good grades.' For example, a lot of kids want to be lawyers, but don't seem too concerned about doing well in high school."
- "The students know what they want, and they are aware of what they are not getting. The students mentioned an inability to get career advice or help, how inaccessible help seemed to be, and so on. One student suggested several ways in which the administration could help her personally, including providing pamphlets about a variety of issues so that the students could gain information without having to make appointments at the front desk with adults who aren't ever there."

<u>How exactly do you "do school"?</u>

Early on in this process, my research partner, Lisa Gonsalves, and I discovered through reports from our research team members that just trying to have a discussion with students was at best boring and at worse complete chaos. Thus, as with the goal maps, to further explore the engagement strategies that students might use in the school context, we tried to develop a creative, yet realistic and concrete activity. We created a story about two students – Tyrone and Tyesha. Though the story was the same for each character, we thought it was important to provide each student a gendered representative that would prompt students to think about themselves in similar situations.

The activity began with an introduction to the story, followed by 4 scenarios:

> Tyesha is a girl in the ninth grade in high school. She has lots of goals and thing she wants to do. For example, Tyesha wants to graduate from high school, and then she wants to go to college. After that she wants to buy a house, get married and have kids. But, Tyesha has a small problem. She needs lots of help to achieve these goals because she doesn't know what strategies to use to help her accomplish her goals. So we're going to help her. From you, what Tyesha needs advice about what to do, where to get help or support, and about who can help her. Give all the suggestions you can whether or not you think they could be possible at a typical high school.
>
> **Scenario 1:** Everyday Tyesha goes to school and tries to do a good job. Now, Tyesha was doing really well in the ninth grade until she missed an important assignment in math class because of something that happened at home. She told the teacher that she was sorry she missed the assignment and asked how she could

make it up, and she explained that she was having trouble in general understanding the material. But the teacher wouldn't let her make up the assignment and was not helpful. Now she thinks the teacher doesn't like her.

Scenario 2: With your help Tyrone has managed to solve his problem and move on to the tenth grade. One day, Tyrone gets into a fight with another boy at the school. The school wants to kick him out for fighting though Tyrone says the fight was not his fault. How does he resolve this problem? Who does he go to?

Scenario 3: It's the end of the eleventh grade and she needs to start planning for college. What does she do to prepare?

Scenario 4: Tyrone is now in the 12th grade and has sent his college applications and is waiting to hear. Even though he has done well with his grades so far, he has to keep at least a B average so that his overall grade point average is high. Recently, one of his close friends got into deep trouble. This friend asked Tyrone for help. The more he tried to help the more stressed out he got, the worse he started doing in his classes. Finally, he realizes he needs to do something in order to stay on track with his own goals. What should he do?

Students were asked to complete the worksheet in pairs and then the whole class discussed the issues raised in the story. Some examples of the responses to Scenario 1 are as follows:

Fend for yourself

- Copy off somebody else
- Do extra credit
- Go after school for help.
- Try harder with the rest of the semester
- Do not miss another school day.
- Go to summer school to make up the math work she missed.

Seek Help from Others

- Tyrone should go explain to his guidance counselor his situation.
- Tell your mother.
- Report it to the principal.
- Try to have someone else explain to her the material.

Question Authority

- Ask [the teacher] why he can't make it up.
- She must study hard or to persuade the teacher to let her make it up.
- Try talking to the teacher again.

Move on

- He should just basically forget about the assignment because it was only one assignment
- Put the difference aside.

Leave

- She could go to another school.
- He drops out of school. He works gets minimum wage.

The question about race

One of the things we learned in this study was that to use the concept of ethnicity with Black adolescents was confusing to say the least. While many of the students involved were African American, many were from Cape Verde, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. During the quantitative data collection process we found that when we explained ethnicity in terms of culture, some students responded. However, when we used race in place of ethnicity, all of the students understood, and many had a lot to say about it. For this reason, and because again the focus of this study was about the students' sociocultural, political, and economic consciousness regarding group membership, and given that all the students could define who they are with regard to race, our next activity tried to understand the students' perceptions of their racial identity and its implications for their engagement in school. Given the complex nature of a conversation about race, and because we thought discussing race would elicit an emotional response as well, we decided to have a structured discussion about this topic, rather than engage in a creative activity.

We first asked students to remember the measures we had them complete in the fall. These included Phinney's MEIM and Stevenson's racial socialization scale. Then we asked specific questions about how they identify themselves:

- How do you tend to identify yourself in terms of race or ethnicity? Does your identity change when you are with different people or in different places?
- How important is your racial/ethnic identity to you?

We then tried to get students to link their responses regarding racial identity to school. During previous observations at the school, my colleague witnessed three interactions that we wanted student to explain to us. The first was an instance where students referred to their school as "Ghetto". What did this mean to students? What makes something "Ghetto"? How do they feel about attending a school they think of as "Ghetto"? Second, students made comments like "Don't give us so much work. We're not white or Chinese". Again, we wanted to know what this meant from their vantagepoint? Do only white and Chinese students do a lot of work? Good work? What kind of work do Black students do? Third, students sometimes say, "I'm being Black today" in reference to not wanting to work in class. What does this mean? What's the difference between being Black and being something else?

The transcriptions from these discussions are currently being transcribed. However, some of our team members have provided some preliminary data via their fieldnotes. From these we have identified three themes that emerged during the discussions:

<u>Race and ethnicity is not located within the students.</u>

- "Race and ethnicity was not something they generally situated inside themselves, but rather as creating problems or only mattering because other people make it matter."

<u>Students distinguish themselves from stereotypes.</u>

- "They were so clear to differentiate themselves from the images of Blacks such as projects, rap, drug dealers, etc."

Students recognize they must traverse "two worlds".

- "That is they have to learn and act in two different worlds: one is white and foreign to them, and the other is Black and feels like home. This double identity was so apparent in our discussion today. They all seem to be aware of the life out there which requires them to act different, but they also know that it does not make them feel comfortable. As a foreigner in this language I think I can relate to their experiences."

Discussion and Analysis Plan

As I have explained each of the activities we engaged in with students, I have also revealed some of our preliminary findings. For this cohort of ninth graders, there is the understanding that to attain any goal they currently have, they must first pass through high school. While some of the scenario responses indicated that students also thought it important to do well in school, the goal maps and worksheets mostly revealed that high school was a place to get through on the way to the next step.

Students expressed many more ideas regarding school engagement in their responses to the Tyrone and Tyesha story than they did in their personal goal maps. For the quantitative portion of this study students completed the School Identification measure (Voelkl, 1993) that looks at whether students value school as well as feel they belong in school. We plan to use both sources of data to further understand the nature of school engagement for students involved in this study.

One other finding from the goal worksheets that we want to better understand is that students often responded that they were hard working students, they didn't goof off, and they were smart. After a year of observing these students and talking to teachers, we see these responses as efforts to contradict the low and negative expectations of others. Students seem to be saying, "We are not dumb, we do work hard, and we are smart".

This conclusion is further supported in the data collected from the discussions about race. Students perceived race to be a problem for other people that then interferes with students' chances in life. Students know that people perceive of them as "not smart" because they are Black. However, students try very hard to distance themselves from such negative stereotypes and put the responsibility on others not to be racist. For example, during one discussion a student said:

> "These Black communities, they're set up in a way so we don't have to achieve any kind of, they're just set up to get where we gotta be, to get the high school diploma and go get a minimum wage job. They don't set it up so we can like strive for something better."

Other comments include:

> "White kids are taught to hate Black people and that makes everything harder for us."

> "Now we have more chances, but white people are still thinking the same way as it was in slavery."

Comments such as these suggest that much more work needs to be done to understand the link between identity, school engagement, and goal attainment. For low-

income African American students it is crucial that they learn ways of effectively engaging in school in order for them to be academically successful. However, educators must pay close attention to the expectations and messages we convey to students about their racial and ethnic identity and their futures. We need to stop telling our students they can be whatever they want to be, all they have to do is work hard. As these students are telling us, they already are working hard. What we need to do is help them understand the path they will have to take in order to attain their goals, despite the obstacles in their way.

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